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A New Opportunity for Regional Scholarly Partnership

An international EpiDoc XML Workshop took place between 03. and 07.09.2013. at the Sv. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia. It was one of a series of events that include EpiDoc training and are held on several occasions in different institutions around the globe each year. Its target audience are scholars dealing with ancient epigraphy and willing to participate in digitization initiatives or start their own projects in this field.

EpiDoc is a subset of TEI, and TEI is a set of rules, standards, and guidelines for the artificial mark-up language XML proposed by an international scholarly consortium. To understand the full potential of this tool for electronic description for philological and antiquarian purposes, first one needs to understand how a mark-up languages works, which was a part of the introductory first day of the 4-day event. The trainers, Gabriel Bodard and Simona Stoyanova from King's College, London, introduced the idea of textual tagging to an audience of 14 scholars from Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Georgia, and Romania. It proves that, for a classicist and/or an epigrapher, which was the professional profile of most of the trainees, the idea of a meta-language describing all the features of a text and its material carrier is not unfamiliar at all. XML (eXtensible Mark-up Language) is a set of rules, both machine - and human-readable, that can describe any feature of an epigraphic monument. It achieves this goal thanks to a set of labels, or tags, encompassing and describing any piece of information from or about the monument. These tags, called *elements*, can be contained within each other in a complex hierarchy and can also contain more specific *attributes* which have a usually pre-determined range of *values*.

Using a set of elements with their attributes and values for a description of an object – not only an epigraphic monument but any object, for that matter – needs to conform to certain rules. The general rules for creating a well-formed document are usually the hardest for a beginner to get used to. This is attained through the use of special editors of XML code, with one of which, oXygen, the trainees got acquainted in the second day of the event.[1] But there is more to that. On each occasion, the encoders may define themselves their own set of rules what should the hierarchy of elements and their attributes be like. But, for philological purposes, this work has been already done by the international consortium known as TEI (Text Encoding Initiative).[2] The TEI guidelines, currently in their 5th version, contain a more than 900-pages' worth of elements, attributes, and values. This is a successful attempt to cover all the possible cases that could present themselves before the researchers when they need to encode a text in digital form for philological purposes. Of this inexhaustible hoard of solutions to very particular problems, the specific features applicable for epigraphic and papyrological documents were derived and ordered by EpiDoc.

EpiDoc is a common effort conceived at King's College, London and further developed internationally to elaborate an accurate and detailed set of elements for the describing of ancient inscriptions or papyri.[3] Its core was first designed for the electronic publication of Charlotte Roueché's epigraphic corpus *Inscriptions from Aphrodisias*.[4] Later, the initial achievements of EpiDoc were applied and expanded by diverse initiatives such as: *The US Epigraphy Project*;[5] *The Vindolanda Tablets Online*;[6] *Curse Tablets of Roman Britain*;[7] *Ancient Greek and Latin Inscriptions from Upper Macedonia, Aegean Thrace and Achaia*,[8] and others. Presently, teams of scholars are using the EpiDoc schemas to present in digital form the inscriptional heritage of Roman Tripolitania, the Northern Black Sea coast, etc. Since 2010, a team of Bulgarian epigraphers from the University of Sofia has

1 In the vast world of XML editing software, oXygen is considered one of the best solutions when it comes to philolofical work. See http://www.oxygenxml.com/.

2 For more information about the initiative, as well as a detailed description of their tag-set, see http://tei-c/org.

3 The current guidelines and more information about the initiative can be found at http://epidoc.sf.net.

4 http://insaph.kcl.ac.uk/iaph2007/index.html.

5 http://usepigraphy.brown.edu/.

6 http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk/.

7 http://curses.csad.ox.ac.uk/.

8 http://pandektis.ekt.gr/pandektis/handle/10442/326.

been working on an electronic database of inscriptions from ancient Thrace and Moesia Inferior in the framework of the Telamon Project whose site will be up and running in the first months of 2014. It was by the joint effort of the Telamon crew, led by Prof. Mirena Slavova, and the Digital Humanities Programme to the "Alma Mater" Centre for Excellence in Humanities at the University of Sofia, whose head is Assoc. Prof. Dimitar Birov, that the whole event was planned, organized, and funded.

The purpose of all the EpiDoc trainings is twofold. On the one hand, it is a great opportunity for many researchers around the world to expand quickly and easily their competences in a new, fast-growing and fascinating interdisciplinary domain. On the other hand, all the participants in this as well as the other trainings were encouraged to start their own projects, simultaneously applying and enhancing the possibilities of EpiDoc XML. The standards developed by EpiDoc are not set once and for all but could be perfected with the inclusion of new monuments from new regions, with their own peculiarities and difficulties for the encoder. The Balkans and the Black Sea are one of the regions with the richest and most diverse epigraphic heritage left from antiquity. At the same time, the peculiarities of many of the monuments are shared throughout the area. The common local past is quite often asserted by common ethnonyms, religious and secular institutions, as well as sometimes common prosopography and onomastics. Thus, getting together to work on particular problems connected with the description and representation of ancient inscriptions in digital form was the first step in a long collaborative process. A process whose initial stage will be the building of a network of specialists from the countries of the Balkan Peninsula and the Black Sea. And whose final stage will hopefully be achieved with the building of a network of local digital epigraphic collections.